tions and are subject to daily pressures from management. When they negotiate a deal, they must work to that deal themselves..

For this reason they must always be answerable to their membership rather than simply functioning as agents of discipline over them.

Calls to put the conduct of union business exclusively in the hands of 'professional negotiators' has become a code for saying that unions should not fight for their members interests but act as industrial relations consultants.

This is why it is vital that trade unionists defend the role of shop stewards who pledge themselves to operate solely in the interests of their members.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

The Rank and File Solidarity Network, which is composed exclusively of shop stewards and union activists, calls on union members to offer solidarity to the Limerick shop stewards.

You can do this by adding your name to the list of union members who have signed the following declaration.

We the undersigned support the right of Limerick Corporation shop stewards to represent their members.

We call on SIPTU to restore their shop steward credentials as they were elected by the members and continue to hold the confidence of the membership.

We call on unions to defend shop stewards from management bullying.

We reject the right of the Labour Relations Commission to interfere in union affairs with a view to undermining the role of the shop stewards.

■ Copies of a petition with this declaration are available from *Rank and file Solidarity Network, 105 O'Hogan Road, Dublin 10.*

❑I want copies of the petition ❑I want copies of this factsheet
❑I want to join the Rank and File Solidarity Network

Name _____

Address _____

_____

Phone _____

FACTSHEET

Attacked for representing their members:

DEFEND LIMERICK CORPORATION SHOP STEWARDS

Shop stewards at Limerick Corporation are facing an unprecedented attack. And one of the main groupings which is orchestrating the campaign against them is the Labour Relations Commissions, which is supposed to be a neutral body.

The case has wide implications for the role of the shop steward. It raises issues about whether shop stewards are supposed to represent their rank and file members or be subject to full time officials who want to 'discipline' the members.

THE BACKGROUND:

Over the last four years, there have been a number of industrial disputes at Limerick Corporation. The main reason for these disputes has been management's policy of privatisation.

They have run down the manning levels in the Corporation to such a degree that services cannot be provided by direct labour.

Private contractors have now been deployed to collect rubbish and provide maintenance.

Shop stewards at Limerick Corporation have behaved as good trade unionists and resisted these moves. In 1994, the unions concluded a full time permanent manning agreement with management — but this was not honoured and staffing levels continue to decline.

As a result of the shop stewards resisting the run down of direct labour, management has embarked on a campaign of bullying, insisting that they have 'a right to manage' in the way they please without any consultation. When shop stewards have stood up to this, they have been harassed and transferred between departments.

LABOUR COMMISSION INTERVENTION

In November 1998, Declan Morrin from the Advisory Service of the Labour Court issued a report on the situation in Limerick Corporation.

The report claimed to have been based on a random sample of workers and management. Yet it gave no figures for its sample.

It claimed to have reported the views of workers with a suggestion , for example, that 'some shop stewards and some workers want to cause trouble rather than do their work'. Yet these were not the exact words used by the interviewees and, moreover, no figure was given for how many workers made this point.

In brief the document was a sloppy, biased report which was geared at undermining the shop stewards.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Morrin report made a number of recommendations that represent an attempt to interfere in the working of the unions at Limerick Corporation.

The main thrust of these recommendations are to try to undermine the influence of the shop stewards and make them answerable to full time officials rather than directly to their rank and file.

The recommendations include the following:

■**"All union business in the Corporation to involve full time officials who will advise and support the shop stewards"**

This is an attempt to make union matters go through the full time official. It cuts down the scope for shop stewards to negotiate directly.

■**"The Personnel Department... do not allow workers and/or shop stewards open access to the Personnel Officer"**

Again this is an attempt to tie up the industrial relations machinery in a long grievance machinery where the officials dominate.

■**"That a communications forum be established immediately by both sides. Each department/depot should be represented by one person (not a shop steward)"**

By deliberately excluding shop stewards from a communications forum, the report seeks again to undermine their role and create a space where management can claim they 'misrepresented' negotiations.

REACTIONS

The LRC report has coincided with an attempt by management at Limerick Corporation and senior SIPTU officials to attack the shop stewards.

■SIPTU officials have removed the credentials of the President and Secretary of the SIPTU section (the local shop stewards) without any consultation with the local section committee or branch committee.

■Simultaneously management have refused to let shop stewards who were out sick return to work. Instead they have insisted that they first be cleared by a Corporation doctor.

It seems there is a strategy of collusion between SIPTU officials and management to undermine or even victimise shop stewards who have tried to represent their members to the best of their ability.

The rank and file at Limerick Corporation have recognised this and object strongly. At a meeting on 24th November after the Morrin report was issued, they voted to express their confidence in the shop stewards. They also expressed their 'dissatisfaction with the official service given by SIPTU No 1 branch (Limerick City) over the said period of four years'.

CONCLUSION

A recent report of SIPTU claimed that "SIPTU must re-affirm its identity as a workers organisation acting clearly in the interests of workers".

But how can it do this, if it will not stand by their elected shop stewards?

Shop stewards are far closer to their members than any other representative in the union.

They work alongside the members, experience the same condi-